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ABSTRACT

This position paper analyzes and critiques contemporary American society. Previous research and development efforts to improve the quality of life focused on identification of "social problems" and the application of education programs designed to remedy them. Past efforts failed, however, to enrich the lives of many Americans because they neglected the conceptualization of man in relation to his community. Americans felt increasingly alienated as they shifted from a person-centered to an object-centered world. An alternative to this achievement based society is that of a responsible community spirit in which acceptance, interaction, and respect abound, making life constructive and mutually rewarding. Since public schools fail to meet the various human needs, socialization toward alternative life styles and ideologies needs to occur outside of schools. In conclusion, educators need to focus their personal and professional attention on the problem of enhancing the quality of life in small communities and local neighborhoods. (SJM)

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Mobility or Community: the hard choice of the new professional

Donald W. Oliver and Victoria Steinitz*

This position paper is an attempt to sketch out very briefly an analysis and critique of contemporary American society which leads to the conclusion that educators might best focus their personal and professional attention on the problem of enhancing the quality of life in small communities and local neighborhoods or the residual fragments thereof. This conclusion is based on the premise that research and development efforts in education over the past two decades have failed generally to enrich the lives of many Americans because they have been predicated on an incomplete if not erroneous conceptualization of the "human condition". That view virtually neglects man in relation to community and therefore fails to deal adequately with the question of how people who represent wide variations in temperment, background, or talent can relate to each other constructively over substantial periods of time.

The dominant thrust of "R & D" thinking has been the identification of specific "social problems" and the invention and applicaiton of educational programs designed to remedy or "repair" them--e.g., to reduce the high unemployment rates of low income youth, revise career training programs; to launch an American Sputnik, develop a new physics curriculum for suburban high schools. More recently, reformers have attempted to take a more comprehensive look at the sources of strain in schools and to devise strategies for humanizing existing institutions. For instance, in order to make schools more effective in teaching literacy skills, they might suggest retraining teachers to use more "relevant" instructional approaches, extending policy-making power to parents, or helping the entire staff use their resources

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more intelligently through consultation concerning effective communication and decision-making.

We argue that both of these approaches are seriously flawed because they are based on an inadequate or incomplete social theory--one we might irreverently refer to as the "Great Society" model. This model advances several interwoven claims: that largely because of technological advances, our social, political and economic institutions now provide unlimited opportunity for each individual in the society to achieve the material, psychological, and cultural requirements of the good life. In the exceptional cases where this happy state does not prevail, for example, for the unemployed, aged, retarded, or mentally ill, research can yield ways to change either individuals or institutions so that a good life is attainable. Historically, the Great Society model is based upon a conception of modern America as the product of continuous evolution away from the highly stratified society which characterized Western civilization at the end of the Middle Ages. Medieval society was seen as constraining personal freedom and therefore human potential by imprisoning the individual in a network of intermediary associations characterized by ascribed status: kinship groups, manors, guilds, the church. Western history, especially that of the U. S. has been mainly the story of increasing the opportunity of the individual to maximize his potential by freeing him from the constraints of those traditional associations. A number of classic studies are commonly used to support this interpretation (cf. Alex DeTocqueville, Democracy in America; Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America; F. J. Turner, Significance of the Frontier.)

But it is now obvious that this interpretation of American history is incomplete. What is largely omitted is the fact that the continuous freeing of the individual from the constraints imposed by traditional associations also deprived him of the support which these associations offered. (cf. Oscar and Mary Handlin, The Dimensions of Liberty; Robert Wiebe, The Search for Order; Robert Nisbet, The Quest for Community) To quote Robert Nisbet:

> Our present crisis lies in the fact that whereas the small traditional associations founded upon kinship, faith, or loyalty, are still expected to communicate to individuals the principle moral ends and psychological gratifications of society, they have manifestly been detached from positions of functional relevance to the larger economic and political decisions of our time.
> (Nisbet, p. 54)

In modern society, status is accorded on the basis of successful competition in the economic marketplace. Successful individuals must invest great amounts of energy in competitive striving in the work world if they are to obtain sufficient income to purchase the material goods which define "the good life". The mass competition of an individualistic society destroys mutuality; when combatants compete against each other, there is no time for incompetents.

As we look at American history, we see interconnected dominant themes--growth in the freedom of individuals to make personal choices attended by a diminution in the quality of interpersonal relationships. As more and more Americans have shifted from a person-centered to an object-centered world view, amassing possessions has become the major value in the society and the making and maintaining of mutal commitments to persons has both receded in importance and become ever more difficult to accomplish. The paradox of our history is that viewed from the

present vantage point the much sought after personal freedom seems hollow. Individuals who feel isolated and alone are becoming aware that they may have made it impossible to fulfill a basic human need--a sense of belonging or a sense of community.

The nature and severity of the consequences of the trends we have been describing are different for people of different social positions. Speaking in very broad terms we can distinguish three groups of Americans--upper-middle class professionals and managers; blue and white collar workers; and the very poor.

Affluent Americans have by their affluence succeeded, as success is now defined, but many, particularly the young among them, feel increasingly alienated and unable to find satisfying personal meaning in their lives. They find that even when they wish to, they are unable to abandon the competitive mode of relating to others. The problems of commitment both to individual careers and to other persons often seem insoluble.

The blue and white collar workers, the Middle Americans, are living the "American Dream". In prosperous times their jobs are reasonably secure. They earn enough to satisfy their basic needs and are involved in the struggle to rise economically. Many of their lives still include at least some commitments to organizations like ethnic social clubs and church groups, but they often view these remants of interpersonal support systems more as a hindrance than an asset--involving them in obligations which limit their freedom. They value individual advancement more than traditional ties but conflicts between the two often cause them considerable anxiety.

The poor have benefitted least from the rising affluence in America. Their sense of the injustice of their relative economic deprivation grows as do their feelings of frustration and anger at the treatment they receive from more affluent members of the society. The punishing circumstances of their immediate lives and the unending cycle of poverty lead them to fear others and to assume that their intentions are hostile--prejudgments all too often confirmed in experience. The poor find themselves living in the "promised land" but barred from its riches. (cf. Claude-Brown, Manchild in the Promised Land.) As we look more closely at contemporary America, we see numerous interconnected malfunctions which become more comprehensible in the light of the above analysis:

(1) There is a not-so-subtle tendency in our society to equate success with personal worth and disadvantaged status with personal failure. We tend to see other persons as role occupants, as objects to be judged and accepted--or discarded and placed "out of sight" in special institutions or in segregated ghettos. This allows privileged "competent" people to live with and tolerate large inequalities in a society presumably committed to equality.

(2) The isolation of individuals in homogeneous economically segregated neighborhoods makes the class system "invisible" to both the privileged and the poor. In these already stratified communities, the socialization process inculcates a standardized definition of "success" which values deferred gratification and rewards the efficient performance of instrumental roles regardless of the emotional cost to individuals, i.e. sit still, study hard, perform well on tests, and

forego pleasures of friendship or expressive work or play.

(3) The treatment of incompetents, those who cannot manage economically on their own, is carried on increasingly in an impersonal bureaucratic or "professional" mode. For example, the welfare recipient receives his weekly check and in return must submit, while the professionals, who are allegedly helping him, try to determine whether he is really entitled to that check.

(4) Personally meaningful work is often sacrificed in the interests of efficiency. Large corporate organizations emphasize standardized production, and the worth of individual workers is measured in terms of their ability to produce rapidly. There are fewer and fewer opportunities to work as craftsmen in situations where the individuality of one's products is accorded special value. This demand for uniformity makes workers feel that they are being treated as objects, so young GM workers strike not because they want more money but because they feel dehumanized by the continual step ups in the production line.

(5) The "rape" and pollution of the environment results from an obsession with the production, acquisition and consumption of material objects as the central meaning of life. For example, the elaborate material ritual involved in skiing--the equipment and special clothes, the automobile trip, the ski lodge and restaurant, the tow, the special instruction and medical care--seems more desirable than building snowmen or snowforts, or sledding--activities reflecting a simpler life style built around spontaneous human interaction.

Some Alternative Premises

We would argue that what appears to those who still believe in the

perfectability of an achievement based society as a series of persisting but individually treatable ailments, are symptoms of a more serious if not terminal illness. We propose another set of premises which underlie an alternative approach--the responsible community.

(1) We assume that man depends for his essential well-being upon the regard and affection of others. He must feel that he is accepted for who he is, not merely for what he does. The mutual regard of a loving parent-child relationship is a prototype for the conditions for building a secure identity. The certainty that one is and will be cared for regardless of one's accomplishments is necessary for the healthy development of the child. The conditions for a similar, if less all-inclusive sense of worth and security must be provided by the community throughout the life cycle.

(2) Commitment to responsible social behavior arises out of experiences with a variety of people who share visible common needs. That is, talented people must relate to less talented people; aggressive people must associate with submissive people, lest each perceive his own limited group as representing the full range of humanity and respond maladaptively. When aggressive people associate only with other aggressive people, normal helping and supportive needs go unfulfilled and interpersonal sensitivities are dulled.

(3) Human beings must exploit nature less. The assumption that man can "conquer" nature and mold it to his own image, that it is infinitely malleable, is not only false but is also anxiety-producing. Once the posture of conquest is taken, man tends to reduce his anxiety about whether he can maintain his sense of superior power by an indis-

criminate obsession with further conquest. The necessity for achieving a more harmonious relationship with the natural environment becomes more pressing with the realization that we do not have an infinite supply of natural resources. Studies such as Meadows' The Limits of Growth highlight the critical importance of reducing the need for increasing consumption of material goods so that life on this planet can have a future. We must find ways for people to rely more on each other and less on material objects for the essential meaning in their lives.

If these premises are true, the mechanistic or technological approaches to social reform cannot succeed. We believe that it is simply not possible to provide social conditions which will allow all human beings to cope effectively on their own. The problems of competition and exploitation cannot be solved by making each person just as competent as every other. This may be a necessary step in changing the historical distribution of injustices and inequalities; but it is only a way to change the character of the battle rather than a way to reduce overall competition and exploitation. Despite substantial efforts to equalize people's competencies, we still see tremendous human variation and inequality. Moreover, competition tends to persist as human competencies are escalated. Even when the pie is larger, we all want a larger slice and are not content with what satisfied us before.

For us the central question is not: "How does one 'educate' individuals or 'fix' the social system so all can compete equally and successfully for the material goods and privileges of mass society?" Rather, we ask ourselves, "What range of life styles can interact in some constructive and mutually rewarding way within a responsible small

community? And how can we enhance the quality of life in such communities?"

Schools and Small Communities

What does all this have to do with schools and education? Our alternative set of premises leads us to view contemporary schools as paradoxical institutions and to experience great difficulty in defining satisfying roles for ourselves within them. We see schools as places where the young learn beliefs, dispositions to act, and skills which will better fit them to play conventional roles in the present society. The primary social form for which the individual is fitted is the corporate organization--a complex bureaucratically organized group designed primarily to produce, distribute and consume goods and services. In these terms one sees the job of educators--those who create, manage, and teach in schools--as primarily one of making the process of education and the institutions in which this process is carried out more efficient and humane. But this conception of our work creates problems for us. The tensions are especially acute for those of us who teach subjects whose focus is the human condition itself, e.g., history, sociology, literature, anthropology, psychology. We find ourselves constantly experiencing dissonance between the content of our discipline and the actions we carry out as teachers. We discuss and value the unique and idiosyncratic actions of historical figures, yet treat our students as objects to be processed in uniform batches. We discuss the complex tragi-comedies of families, lovers, political machines, bullfights and robber barons, but the educational setting in which we teach is a rough mix between a factory and an office building. We see

in children's play the spontaneous working out of natural developmental needs, but then limit spontaneity to a scheduled "recess" or orange juice break.

When we step back we note several things. First, the school looks strikingly like the corporate organization for which the student is being prepared. Educators behave much like managers; teachers much like civil servants or bureaucrats in other sectors of the economy. Second, given the needs of the larger society, the function of the schools seems very rational. They sort out students and mold their expectations so they will be intellectually and psychologically prepared to enter other corporate organizations at levels which are appropriate to their abilities and social background, (assuming sufficient room for social mobility). But third, and most distressing, many people in schools find there much destructive tension and anxiety. Recently we have begun to ask whether the destructive aspects associated with schooling are intrinsic to the institution. Is there any way to tune the institution to meet the various human needs for consideration and intimacy, efficacy and work. We have concluded that schools probably carry impossible and conflicting social burdens. The argument leading to this conclusion follows.

The central source of meaning and security in most people's lives has come historically from human attachments developed in families and informal groups. These attachments spontaneously evolve and grow as men and women mate and build family life and as families interact in neighborhoods or small communities. The history of man's tendency to build small communities is probably as old as the species and was vitally

adaptive for most of man's history as a means of providing himself with food, shelter and protection. In our teaching we intuitively understand and use these facts, for our subject matter is often the drama of small groups of people coping with each other and with the press of circumstances around them.

But there we are in a school. We have a syllabus which describes our actions in terms of objectives: knowledge, skills and attitudes to be taught, materials (curriculum) to be used, standardized tests to be administered so that we can evaluate the effectiveness with which we have processed the youngsters.

We teachers constantly face the dissonance between two very different notions of what man is "supposed to be". Each time we deal with an individual student to admonish him for running in the corridor or to ask him about his plans for the future--we are pulled in two different directions. Is the school a kind of neighborhood or small community where the old and the young, the gifted and the average, boys and girls, men and women relate to each other in some mutual and interdependent way; or is the school a business where children are trained for competitive adult work roles? Humanists--and many students--are predisposed to look at school as a neighborhood, as a community; they are required to act, more often than not, as training agents or subjects to be trained. It is the persistent conflict between these two modes of relating that makes the role so frustrating, and the absence of small community that closes off alternatives.

Until recently, the conflict was construed mainly as the "teachers'" problem. So it was to be overcome in teacher "training".

Charismatic teachers handle the problem with the least difficulty because they can deal with large groups of students in a pseudo-personal way. Plain average teachers are then compared with the charismatic teacher, feel inadequate, and either quit teaching because they think of themselves as failures, or revert to the "professional" model where the roles of teachers and students are clearly delineated and "special" relationships are taboo. They can then blame their frustrations on the need for better tools (new curriculum, special training in human relations skills, etc.); they see their students either as terminal cases or as needing special treatments as yet to be discovered. And not surprisingly, most students (except perhaps in privileged communities) seem to be terminal cases.

This analysis suggests that the essence of reform in schooling consists in dealing with the underlying conflict or ambiguity in the nature of the institution. Is the school some kind of business organization or factory? Or is the school a small community? Some modern school reformers admit that schooling is to be seen as a business or factory (like any other complex organization in the society), and argue that it should be made both more efficient and humane. Other reformers claim that if schools were informal communities where feelings could be freely expressed and deeper relationships developed, systematic learning would somehow spontaneously follow. And there are counter-critics who argue that the school is destined to fail within either frame--that society should be "deschooled" altogether.

Our conclusion is that the present institution called "school" tends very much toward the business-factory model; that the institution

should be reformed in the sense of making life there somewhat more pleasant; but that ideally, the two modes of human relating currently required in schools should be separated.

We do not argue either that there are no basic literacy skills or that systematic instruction in them is inherently wrong. Quite the contrary, acquiring cognitive skills and knowledge is necessary both to function in society as it now is and to envision more creative life styles. Moreover, the increasing range of learning that can logically be deemed basic seems to place a premium on the maintenance of institutions capable of efficiently transmitting essential knowledge and skills. It is our hunch though that it is impossible to reform the heavy-handedness and content of the socialization process within school, while maintaining the goals of teaching basic literacy. The open school--free school--alternative school experiments seem to demonstrate over and again that reforming schools by attempting to move them from a business-factory model to a small community model exacerbates the fundamental ambiguity, drives them through a period of intolerable conflict which either kills them or forces them to reaccommodate gradually to their initial condition. It is for these reasons that we believe that sustained socialization toward alternative life styles and ideologies--toward collective responsibility, personal concern, and the valuing of diversity--if it is to occur at all must occur outside of schools.

We feel that schools should become intensive learning centers where children and adults pursue individual courses of study, spending only that minimal time necessary to acquire essential skills and

competencies. Children should spend more of their time in settings where they can relate informally to a variety of other children and adults. They should be able to play and explore their environments without a continual press toward productive activity. They should be involved in community work projects where the tasks are real and their contributions necessary. Ideally, they should be active participants in the on-going life of the community rather than confined to special preparatory institutions. The obvious question, then, is where will children and young people find leadership for community work?

Dual Roles in Community: Reorienting Professionals toward Community

The common image of a "professional" is one who has control over specialized knowledge and skills, and who sells his services to individuals or to corporate organizations (including the state) in return for his livelihood. His relationships with his clients are generally impersonal, governed mainly by the level of intimacy required to provide his service. This is relatively easy for dentists and lawyers; more difficult for psychiatrists and prostitutes. It is our position that providing helping services to small communities or neighborhoods via the professional model has intrinsic shortcomings. Professionals invariably create non-reciprocal dependency relationships: the client needs the professional in an obvious and visible way that the professional does not need the client; so the client equalizes the relationship with money. The professional, by definition, does not risk his own personhood in the relationship in nearly the same way as does the client.

It is our conviction that new lifestyles have to be created which emanate only partly from the professional model. To earn a living, one might continue to teach, minister to a church, do social work, write,

practice law or heal -- any of these is economically viable. But the pursuit of a professional career must not be all-consuming. A major portion of our intellectual and emotional energies should be reserved for community life where we can act as committed participants and not as skilled specialists. For as we become involved in the life of a small community, we may begin to experience the joys and pains of sustained relationship -- we may take risks and become vulnerable, we may need support and receive it, we may share with others and work toward common goals.

In the last analysis whether or not much of what we have been saying has implications for the world in which we live depends on individual personal choices. As long as gifted charismatic people choose to use their talents to "succeed" in universal terms (to become professional or generally prominent in the competitive world of the big organization, the society in which we live will continue on its present destructive trip. When these same people deliberately choose to be known and appreciated in modest local settings, the trend may reverse itself. The system will not change overnight. But it is only when a large proportion of the most talented and insightful people are helping to build and support community at the grass roots will all mankind have any chance at all to flourish in the midst of a technical order that breeds its own exploitative tendencies.